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ABSTRACT

Until recently, technological advancement was an unquestioned societal goal. Today, however, controversy and public debate are beginning to arise over a wide variety of technologies, their development, and their use. As certain aspects of technology begin to be perceived as a possible threat to our health, privacy, environment, and safety, families are being forced to assess whether the potential benefits of certain technologies justify the risks and, in the process, are being faced with significant ethical dilemmas. Because the family plays the role of a mediator between individuals and society, it is important that families be capable of making ethical decisions and be able to put the opinions of experts in proper perspective while at the same time striking a balance between their commitment to private goals and their responsibility for collective well-being. Information processing, energy, and medical technologies are among the areas that are posing ethical dilemmas for families. As practitioners, teachers of family life education programs must help families manage technology for an improved quality of life by helping their students (1) explore technological options, (2) identify personal values and goals, (3) make reasoned judgments about the ramifications of these values and goals, and (4) participate in the political process. (MN)

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ETHICAL ISSUES ENCOUNTERED BY FAMILIES IN A HIGH TECH SOCIETY

by

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Recently, the media has described our society as high tech. Technology surrounds us in our daily life. Some of it we take for granted such as cars, telephones and refrigerators. Other technical devices such as computers, many of us aspire to own. Still other technology precepitates heated public and private debates since it appears to challenge our personal attitudes, beliefs and values. Examples of these technologies include surrogate mothering, nuclear power and television.

During this presentation we will be exploring the impact of technology on families. My remarks are based on the assumption that decision making with regard to technology should not be dependent on knowledge alone. Rather, values both individual and collective must be taken into consideration if we are to obtain an optimal quality of family life in a rapidly changing world. First, I will briefly define technology and discuss some conflicting views regarding it. This will lead into the role of families in mediating values between individuals and society and the role of experts in technological decisionmaking. I will then briefly review some ethical dilemmas encountered by families as they attempt to arrive at decisions regarding the proper use of technology. Finally, I will suggest some areas in which practicioneers can help families attain an optimal quality of life in a high tech society and describe some specific strategies to use with individuals as they entertain questions about the proper use of technology.

TECHNOLOGY: NEW OPTIONS, NEW PROBLEMS

Until recently, technological progress was an unquestioned societal goal. In the past, most Americans firmly held to the belief that science and technology had the power to change our lives for the better. Today, however, we find controversy and public debate erupting over a wide variety of technologies, their development and their use, in contrast to the past when these decisions were left to the province of experts.

Many individuals think of technology, in its most limited form --- as synonomous with machines. However, for our purposes, technology is defined as the application of scientific knowledge to the meeting of human desires and needs. In this sense, technology includes all efforts of individuals to control their material and human environment in order to provide for an optimal quality of life.

If we hold this broader view of technology a certain irony confronts us; namely that technology may cause threats to our health, our privacy, our environment and our safety. Ellul (1964) noted that technological solutions to human problems generate more problems of a higher order. In this same vein, Misthene (1981) noted that technology has both positive and negative sides. It creates new opportunities and generates new problems by enlarging the realm of goal choices. Thus, technology can induce value change.

To illustrate this point, consider food additives used to prolong the shelf life of products. Recent findings indicate that some of these additives may cause or contribute to cancer.

Another example is nuclear power. Initially promoted as a safe, effective means of energy it is now found to be expensive and of questionable safety. In addition, it presents us with serious problems of waste disposal. For some of us, old values which placed efficiency first have given way to new values emphasizing safety.

THE PLACE OF ETHICS IN TECHNOLOGICAL DECISION MAKING

Most of us clearly recognize that our systems of transportation and communication, our patterns of health care and education, our environments for work, play and daily living have been and will continue to be affected by technological innovations (Arcus, 1984). As noted previously, when we attempt to improve our quality of life through technology it is common to see other problems evolve. With many technologies, typically both positive and negative outcomes occur. As families attempt to make decisons about technology the central question for consideration is how to determine whether potential benefits justify risks. As Sawhill (1979, p.29) noted: "What should guide mankinds' interventions with nature? The answer is ethics, for it is, finally, the character and quality of our standards of conduct -- our ethics -- which will determine the character and quality of our lives."

When families ask "What should we do about.....?" they are posing an ethical question whose ultimate answer is based on values. Ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of good and evil and with standards for proper conduct. With ethical questions there are no absolute right or wrong answers but answers which are contextually right or wrong for

individuals and groups. Ideally, answers to ethical questions should be resolved through reasoned consideration by individuals and then throug' consensus both within the family and in the larger society.

THE FAMILY AS A MEDIATOR OF VALUES

With the rapid development of new technologies (invitro fertilization, computers, robotics) and the widespread use of some older technologies, (birth control pill, television, solar energy) families are increasingly called upon to make decisions which will ultimately affect the quality of their lives. In may instances, these are ethical decisions and require answers based on personal, family or societal values.

One of the recognized functions of families is to carry out a mediating role between individuals and society. This mediating role is especially relevant for values. As the family filters values from the larger society some are adopted, some rejected, and some modified. Technology has a direct impact on this process because of its capacity for creating new opportunities and options. Nichols(1980) noted that traditionally, parents transmitted their values to children but increasingly today, both parents and children find themselves confronted simultaneously with new technologies which raise ethical dilemmas with which parents have no previous experience with. Computers and certain forms of medical technology fall into this catagory. Thus, while the young attempt to develop their own value positions, parents find themselves having to reconsider old values in a new light or accept new values. Reevaluations have the potential to breed

conflict within the family and between groups in society. Therefore, it is vitally important for individuals to have good communication skills which will enable individuals to clarify issues and engage in dialogue about these issues within the family. Ideally, dialogue regarding ethical dilemmas would also occur between groups in society. The goal of dialogue in this setting would be consensus regarding proper use of technology so an optimal quality of life for all would result.

THE EXPERT AND THE FAMILY

Besides serving as a mediator of values, families today are increasingly relying on experts to guide them in everyday decisions. In many instances, bureaucrats, legislators and the courts are relying on expert opinion without consulting families or other indviduals who will ultimately be affected by these decisions. In other instances, families through personal decison or through participaton in the political process override experts so that personal preferences can be expressed.

Because of this situation, families need to be concerned with who is controlling policy choices with regard to technology. Our tendency to defer to individuals with technical knowledge enables those with expertise to exert a powerful influence on both public policy decisions and private choices. What needs to be kept in mind is that technical competence is a resource which is frequently exploited by parties on both sides of an issue to justify policy decisions. We need to remember that the value premises of experts frequently influence their findings and recommendations.

Since technological change is so rapid, many families are

overwhelmed and thus react by disengaging from decision making and the political process. As a result, experts are free to make decisions but the moral outcomes of these decisons occur by default.

In other instances, families recognize that controversy surrounding technological issues require more than knowledge; they require an ethical judgement based on values. Such families recognize that they are no less equipped to render judgement than the most brilliant scientist or expert. They rise to the challenge and encourage active examination of values and goals in line with their conception of an optimal quality of family life for themselves and others. These families work to strike a balance between their committment to private goals and their responsibility for collective well being. In addition, such families also recognize that our modern technological society calls for reasoned dialogue and social action on the part of all citizens if we are to utilize the new possibilities and deal with the new problems which technology creates.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS ENCOUNTERED BY FAMILIES

Families typically make decisons regarding technology in several areas: information processing technology, food technology, energy technologies, and medical technology. In the catagory of information processing, families frequently confront decisions about the place of computers and televison in their lives.

With regard to computers, if a family owns a computer they face decisions about the proper use of the computer. Should it

be used to supplement the formal schooling of their children, as a family management tool, as a form of family recreation? If a family owns a computer and finds that family interaction patterns have been affected by having a computer in the home then they must decide what if anything should be done about this situation. In addition, computers provide some indviduals with the option of working at home. If this is the case, a family must decide what to do about this option after weighing the positives and negatives. Finally, increasing numbers of workers are using computers for long periods of time at the job site. In this case recent research indicates that long term use of computers may pose health risks for workers. The use of computers on the job and in the home raise ethical issues having to do with family interaction patterns, the mental and physical health of individuals, equal access across income groups, socialization of children, privacy and cost versus benefit.

Television also poses some ethical dilemmas. A primary concern faced by most families is how much time should be spent by the family watching televison. Here concerns focus around the effects of advertising, violence, sterotyping and the possibility of individual expectations being raised to unreasonable levels so that feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction and low self esteem may result. Television raises ethical issues having to do with the socialization of children, the role of families in mediating values and the role of government regulation.

Another broad area of technology which directly affects families is energy technology. Here families must confront the question of what should be done about conserving scarce

resources. Is it fair for one family to conserve while another family squanders energy if they can afford to? Another issue recently getting much public attention concerns families who insulate their homes in order to save money are finding they may be exposed to unhealty amounts of radon or other substances in the air. Thus, conserving energy may lead to health risks. If families choose to take a low tech approach to energy consumption problems may still arise. For instance in one western city many families have chosen to heat their homes with wood. This action resulted in an entire valley being engulfed in smog and polluted air. In this case, considerations revolve around economics versus quality of life. Energy technology often confronts families with ethical dilemmas revolving around questions of distributive justice, individual freedom of choice, government intervention and regulation and cost versus benefit.

Food technology is a third catagory affecting families. Advances in food storage and preservation have led to a host of technologies which many families take for granted. Still a central question facing families is what to do with regard to food choices in order to maintain optimal health? Some food additives and preservatives have been shown to pose health risks. Therefore, families must decide whether convenience is worth the health hazards posed by some of these products.

In our society, "thin is in", consequently large numbers of Americans are on perpetual weight loss regiemes. A whole host of weight loss products are actively promoted in the marketplace. In addition, many Americans have poor diets while ingesting a host

of vitamin and mineral supplements to substitute for their poor diets. Families must make choices about consuming a wide variety of natural products to maintain adequate nutrition or use convenience foods which may be doctored with additives and preservatives. Dilemmas about food choices raise issues about health risks, cost versus benefits and government regulation.

Probably the most familiar ethical dilemmas facing families is in the medical area. If families want children but find they can't conceive, they are faced with a whole host of fertility options ranging from artificial insemination by donor, to invitro fertilization to surrogate mothers. Other families conceive but wonder whether they should take advantage of prenatal diagnostic techniques. If prenatal diagnostic techniques are employed and a damaged fetus is detected families are faced with ethical decisons about whether to have an abortion, have a deformed child which could mean enormous financial and emotional costs or to try fetal surgery. If a deformed child is born, families must come to grips with whether prolonging the life of a severly deformed child is ethical.

Birthing options are increasingly in the news. The majority of families still follow the preferences and advice of powerful medical groups which recommend hospital deliveries. On the other hand, a small but increasing number of families are choosing to make the birth experience a family affair by delivering at home or in a free standing birth center attended by a midwife and other family members.

As medical technology advances, our life expectancy has increased. Hence, increasing numbers of families must confront

questions about employing life extending technologies for chronically ill adults. Some families are choosing to care for ill family members at home or in a hospice. These environments are considered low tech. In contrast, other families choose to have their members cared for in the high tech environment of a hospital.

Medical technology raises dilemmas for families which challenge our deepest beliefs about individual freedom to choose, family support systems and privacy from government regulation and interference. In addition, issues of risk and safety, cost versus benefit, distributive justice and quality of life are brought to the fore.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

As practicioneers, our concern is how to help families manage technology for an improved quality of life. This management necessarily includes an exploration of the ethical ramifications of employing various technologies. To attain this goal, we can focus our efforts in three primary areas. The first area is probably most familiar to us. It is what I will call instrumental action; that is helping families to choose rationally from among competing alternatives in order to reach their goals. To accomplish this goal, families can benefit from strategies which help them to work through the decision making process: identifying family goals, values and resources, locating sources of information, planning and evaluating the results to determine if family goals and values were met.

The second area which practicioneers can focus on is

communication. This area is particularly important if we recognize the role families play in mediating values within the family and between the family and the larger society. Within this area, the first step is helping indviduals to arrive at self understanding: what are my beliefs, values, attitudes and goals and how do these mesh with societal norms. This first step is essential if we are to help families achieve the second step which is improved interpersonal communication. Individuals must have a degree of self understanding if they hope to successfully communicate personal values, beliefs, attitudes and goals to others both within and outside the family. Improved interpersonal communicaton skills then support family members as they dialogue with others outside the family in an attempt to arrive at consensus on norms for the use of technology so that an optimal quality of life is possible for all.

The thrid area which practicioneers can focus on is emancipatory in nature. Individuals and families need to be critically conscious of the role of experts in society. In addition, they need to be aware of the tendency in our society towards technological determinism where human needs take seccnd place to technology in the name of progress. Therefore, in our work with clients and students, we need to stress critical thinking skills such as prediction, inference, analysis, planning, judging, hypothesizing, evaluating, interpreting, generalizing and defending. We also need to encourage clients and students to critically examine societal norms and assumptions which may interfere with attaining an optimal quality of family life. Once critical consciousness is raised, families need to be

encouraged to act both within the home and especialy in the larger society through the political process in order to see that technology is used toward humane purposes. The ultimate goal of emancipation is freedom. As Hansgen (1984, p.463) has noted, "the hope of humans is to step free of technological determinism by establishing a personal set of limits within which to conduct ones life based on committment and responsibility."

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, technology will continue to create new options and problems. We will continue to have an expanding view of what options are available regarding an optimal quality of life. Therefore, decisons must not only be based on knowledge but should also be guided by ethical considerations. Initially, families must be clear about their own values and goals and then take advantage of political participation to influence collective values. Those of us working with individuals and families have an opportunity to help people to (1) explore technological options, (2) identify personal values and goals (3) make reasoned judgements about the ramifications of these values and goals and (4) encourage individuals to participate in the political process so an optimal quality of family life can be achieved by all.

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